Ivan Franko

THE PAINTED FOX

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A Fable

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"Oh, go away! Don't talk nonsense!" his friends replied.

"What nonsense? Well, you'll see!" our fox replied raucously.

"Maybe we'll see, and maybe we won't. Dogs walk the streets in packs there. Perhaps you can change into a flea, so that they can't see you and tear you apart."

"Well, you'll see. I won't turn into a flea, and they still won't tear me apart!" the fox persisted, and made a firm decision to go to the town the very next day, marketing day, and take a chicken from the market.

But this time, poor Mikita overestimated himself.

Through the hemp and the corn he went, safely reaching the outskirts of the town; through the gardens he dashed, jumping over the low hedges and hiding among the vegetables until he reached

the very centre of the town. But here was trouble! For at least a brief moment, he would have to expose himself on the road, both to reach the market and to return. Both on the street and in the marketplace there was a great deal of shouting, noise, disorder, wagons creaking,

wheels rumbling, horses stamping their hooves, pigs squealing, shopkeepers jabbering, villagers shouting — in a word, a hubbub such as our Mikita had never seen in his dreams nor heard in any fever.

But what could he do? Having made a decision, he had to finish what he had begun. After sitting for a couple of hours among some weeds by a fence near the street, he became somewhat used to the noise. After looking around a bit to see the best route and method to use to reach his target, he gathered up his courage, took a run, and in a flash jumped over the fence and onto the road. The road was under a dust cloud raised by the many people who were walking and riding on it. Few people noticed the fox, and of those who did none were interested in him — a dog is a dog, people thought, which made Mikita's day. He made himself as small as possible, and using a ditch, ran as quickly as he could to the marketplace where a long row of women sat with grain sieves, baskets and bags containing eggs, butter, fresh mushrooms, cloth, seeds, chickens, ducks and other good things like that for sale.

However, he had barely reached the marketplace when a dog ran toward him. From the opposite side, another dog was approaching, and there, ahead, he saw a third. Our Mikita would not be able to fool the dogs. They would quickly smell him out and, barking, furiously fall upon him! Lord, how frightful! Mikita twisted and turned like that fly in hot water. What could he do? Where could he hide? Thinking fast, he bounded to the nearest open exit and thence into the yard. There, he crouched and looked around for a place to hide, all the while keeping an ear cocked for the dogs. Oh, oh! He heard them! They were very close! Looking about, the fox saw some sort of barrel standing in one corner of the yard, and without too much thought, he leaped into the barrel to hide.

He was lucky, for he had barely jumped into the barrel when the dogs arrived — a whole pack of them — barking, snarling, sniffing about.

"He was here! He was here! Look for him!" the leaders called out.

The whole pack rushed about the very small yard, scraping, sniffing, scratching, but unable to find any sign of the fox. A few times they approached the barrel, but the bad smell coming from it turned

them away. Finally, unable to find him, they ran on farther. Mikita the fox was safe.

Safe, but at what price!

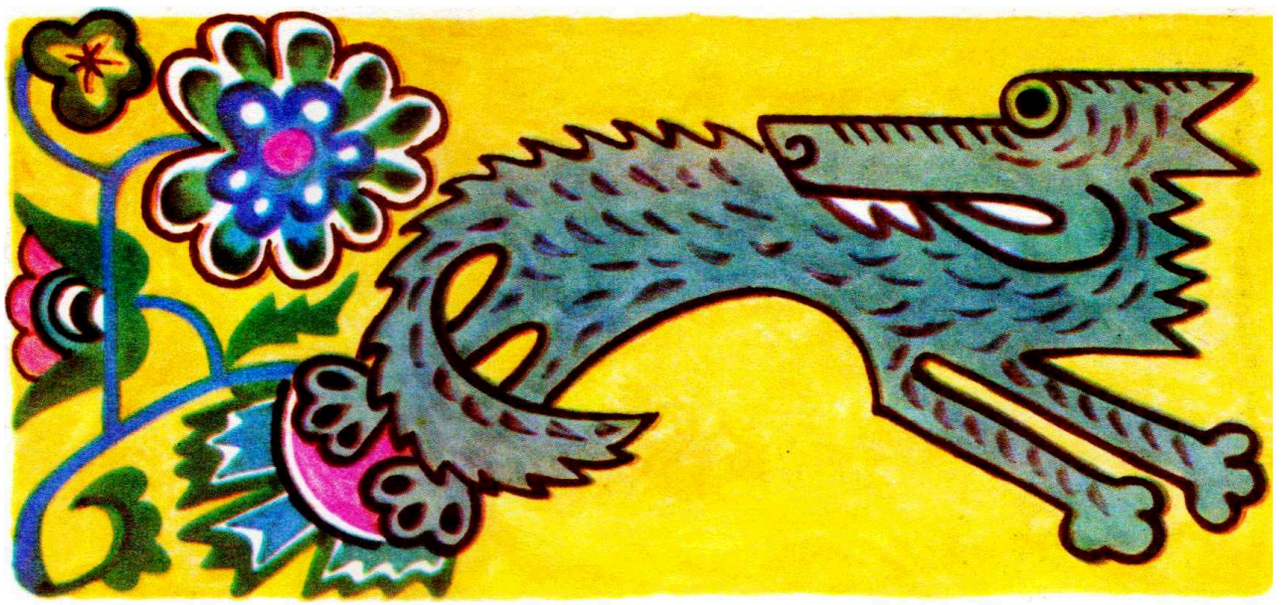
The barrel which had so unexpectedly given him haven was half full of oil paint. For you see, in the house lived a painter who painted walls, fences and park benches. It just happened that the next day he was supposed to paint a large stretch of fence and had, in preparation, mixed a barrel of paint and left it in the corner of the yard to have it ready.

Leaping into this solution, Fox Mikita had immediately sunk in it over his head, almost drowning. But then, reaching the bottom of the barrel with his hind legs, he stood so that his whole body was covered with the paint and only his muzzle, also painted blue, was slightly above the paint. So he waited until the frightening peril had passed.

The unfortunate animal's heart was pounding, hunger churned his guts, the smell of the oil almost choked him, but what else could he have done? Thank god he was alive! Even that wasn't assured — suppose the painter came to the barrel and found him there?

However, there was nothing he could do about it. Scared almost to death, poor Fox Mikita had to stay quietly in the paint until nightfall, as he knew full well that if he appeared on the street in this condition then not only the dogs, but the people too, would fall upon him and not release him alive. Only after it was dark did Fox Mikita dare to jump quickly out of the barrel, streak across the road and, not meeting anyone, leap into the garden. From there, through the weeds, over the low hedges, past the cabbages and corn, he dashed into the forest. He left a long trail of blue tracks behind him before some of the paint rubbed off and the rest dried up.

It was already very dark when Mikita reached the forest, and he was not in that part of the woods near his home but in the completely opposite part. Tired, hungry and barely alive, he still had to run about two kilometres to get home. He did not have enough strength left to do it. After refreshing himself somewhat with a few eggs he found in a quail's nest, he clambered into the first good empty lair he could find, burrowed over his head into some leaves which he gathered together, and fell asleep as though in the comfort of a stateroom.



Whether he awoke early or late the next day, the books do not tell. It is enough that after awakening from a sound sleep, yawning widely and spitting three times in the direction of the previous day's shameful adventure, he carefully, in the manner of foxes, left the den. Pitter-patter! Sniff, sniff! The forest was quiet, peaceful, clean all over. The fox's heart beat faster! "The best time for hunting," he thought. But at that moment he glanced at himself — dear God! He cried out in indignation. What was this? Fearfully, he started to run but, unfortunately, you cannot run away from yourself. He stopped and looked at himself again — was it really he? Was this his fur, his tail, his paws? No! He refused to accept it — so much the worse for him! He was some sort of wonderful and frightening dark blue animal with a terrible scent, covered with some sort of scales or thorny bumps, or quills like a hedgehog. His tail was not a tail, but something large and heavy almost like a thorny club.

Mikita stopped and sniffed, considering the beauty he had become. He tried shaking himself — no result. He tried rolling around in the grass — no result. He tried to scratch the scales off with his paws — it hurt, but did not come off. He tried licking it — no result. He ran to

the pond and jumped into the water to wash off the paint — no success. The oil paint had dried solid during the warm night in the den, and would not let go. Do what you will, god-forsaken Mikita!

At that moment, Brother Wolf happened by. The previous day, he had been well acquainted with our Mikita, but now, seeing such an unheard-of blue animal, all quills and bumps and with a heavy tail which might have been made of brass, he howled in fear. Gathering his senses, he ran off to give the alarm, barely whimpering. In the woods he met the she wolf, farther along the bear, the boar, the fawn. They all asked him what the problem was but he only sighed, opened his eyes wide, and babbled, "He's there! He's there! It's horrible! It's fierce!"

"But what is it?" his friends inquired.

"I don't know! I don't know! It's terrible!"

What was this monstrosity? The animals gathered around, trying to calm Brother Wolf, giving him water to drink. Monkey Fruzya pulled three hairs from between his eyes and threw them to the wind so that the Wolf's fears could be similarly dispersed. But nothing

worked. Since talking to the wolf was a wasted effort, the animals decided to go together in the direction indicated by the wolf, and see for themselves what it was that was so frightening. They reached the place where Fox Mikita was still running about. They took one look and ran away. What else could they do? Such an animal had never been seen nor heard of in all the time that the world and the forest had existed. Who could know its strength, the length of its fangs, the sharpness of its claws, or the shortness of its temper?

However much Mikita was troubled by his new appearance, he nevertheless was clearly aware of the effect that appearance had, first on the wolf and now on the other animals.

"Well," the clever fox thought to himself. "It's not such a bad thing that they are afraid of me. It could be very useful. Just wait, and I'll let you see me."

Lifting his tail and puffing himself up proudly, he went into the depth of the forest, where he knew there was a meeting place for all the forest's denizens. Meanwhile, word of the new, unheard-of and frightening beast had spread through the woods like wildfire. All the animals of the forest wanted to see this new guest, at least from afar, but none dared come too close. Fox Mikita, pretending not to notice this, walked with great dignity, as though in deep thought, until he came to the animals' meeting place. There he sat down on the stump usually reserved for the bear. He sat and waited. Within a half hour, the animals and birds had gathered around the clearing in great numbers. They all wanted to know what sort of apparition this was, but all were afraid of it. None dared to approach it. They stood at a distance, trembling, ready to flee at any moment.

The fox spoke to them first, gently. "My dear ones! Do not fear me! Come closer, for I have something very important to tell you."

But the animals did not come closer, and only the bear, scarcely breathing, dared ask, "What are you?"

"Come closer, and I'll explain everything to you," the fox coaxed gently. The animals moved a little closer, but were still afraid to come too close.

"Listen, my dear ones," the fox said, "and be glad. This morning, Saint Michael made me of heavenly clay — see how blue it is — and breathing life into me, said, 'Quickwit! In the animal kingdom there

reigns disorder, injustice and unrest. No one is secure in life or property. Go down to the earth and be the animals' tsar. Bring them order, rule them justly, let no one harm my animals!'"

Hearing this, the animals clapped.

"Oh, Lord! Then you are to be our benefactor, our tsar?"

"Yes, my children," the fox said gravely.

An unprecedented happiness settled over the animal kingdom. They immediately set about establishing order. The eagles and the hawks hunted chickens, the wolves and bears cut up sheep and calves and set a huge pile of them before the new tsar who took some for himself and distributed the rest equitable among the hungry. Again there was joy, again there were cries of wonder and gratitude. What a tsar! What a benefactor! What an all-wise Solomon! With such a tsar, we shall live like gods till the end of time!

The days passed. Fox Mikita was a good tsar, just and kind, especially since he no longer had to go out hunting, trapping and killing for himself. His obliging ministers brought him everything ready, cut up, even plucked of hair or feathers. And his justice was the usual among animals — the stronger were first served, the weaker never won a case.

Under the new tsar, the animals lived entirely as they had without him. Whoever caught or found something ate, and whoever failed to catch anything went hungry. Whom the hunters killed had to die, and whoever escaped thanked God for his life. But all were glad that they had such a wise, powerful and kind tsar who, in addition, looked so different from the other animals.

Fox Mikita, having become tsar, lived as though it would go on forever. He had only one worry — that the paint would come off his fur, that the other animals would recognize who he really was. Therefore, he never went out in the rain, never went through thick bushes, never scratched himself, and slept only on a soft feather bedspread. In general, he took care not to reveal before his ministers that he was a a fox and not an animal called Quickwit.

A year passed. The anniversary of the day on which he had become tsar was approaching. The animals planned to celebrate that day annually and to have a great concert for that purpose. They formed a choir of foxes, wolves and bears, composed a beautiful cantata and,

in the evening, following a great ceremony, dinner and speeches in honour of the tsar, they appeared and started to sing. Very beautiful! When the bears bellowed out their bass, the oaks trembled. The wolves each howled out a solo which moved the audience to tears. However, when the fox cubs dressed in native costume, yelped out in their thin tenor voices, the tsar could no longer contain himself. His heart overflowed. He let down his guard, and raising his muzzle, could not resist yelping like a fox!

Lord! What is this? All the singers immediately fell silent. The curtain suddenly fell from the eyes of all the ministers and aides to the tsar. Why, this was a fox! A common painted fox! And painted, furthermore, with cheap oil paint! Phoo! And we thought that he was something special! Oh, the liar! Oh, the fraud!

Forgetting his kindness and his celebrated wisdom, and feeling only anger that they had allowed him to deceive them for so long, they all fell upon the unfortunate fox and tore him to shreds.

These events gave rise to a proverb. When a man believes a false friend and lets himself be fooled, when some mischievous fellow deceives us, fleeces us or slanders us, and we become a little wiser from the harm done to us, we say, "Oh, I've known it for a long time! I saw through him as easily as through a painted fox!"

Иван Яковлевич Франко

КРАШЕНАЯ ЛИСА

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(На английском языке)

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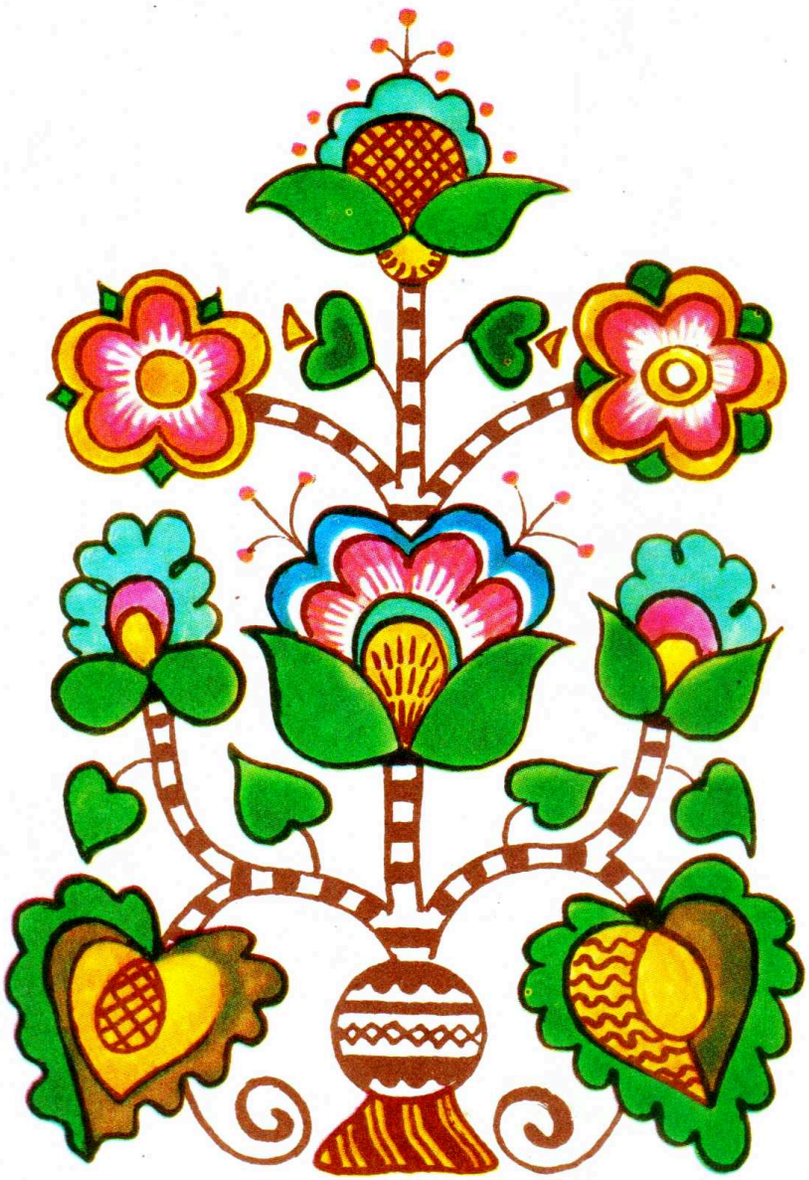

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